

How the Ukraine War Stopped Arctic Brinkmanship

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Abstract

Based on available data in an open-source environment, there was no military antagonism nor any provocative exercises between U.S. and Russian forces in the Arctic between 2022 and 2024. This contrasts the 2015–2021 period where the two rivals provoked each other outside the coast of Norway. Why have U.S. and Russian forces stopped antagonizing each other? Using *Brinkmanship* as a theoretical model of explanation, this study finds the Ukraine War to be an Arctic tranquilizer. This is partly due to fear of nuclear escalation but also due to strategic necessity: neither U.S. nor Russian forces can afford an *overstretch problématique* in the contemporary international environment. As both protagonists forge self-imposed restraints, Russia's 2022 invasion has inadvertently led to more Arctic stability.

Keywords: *brinkmanship, military exercises, the United States, Russia, Norwegian Sea, Bear Gap, Barents Sea, Northern Fleet*

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1. Introduction

This article explores why U.S. and Russian forces have stopped antagonizing each other outside Norway's coast. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's Northern Fleet has ceased provocative exercises west of the Bear Island Gap into the Norwegian Sea. Correspondingly, U.S. air and naval forces have halted extraordinary maneuvers east of the Bear Gap into the Barents Sea. This observation contrasts the 2015–2021 period. During those years, Russian aviation simulated offensive strikes against military headquarters and intelligence installations in Norway and harassed NATO Maritime Groups outside the

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Lofoten Islands. Correspondingly, U.S. and allied forces performed extraordinary operations deep into the Barents Sea where the Northern Fleet has its nuclear second-strike capability. Even a carrier strike group (CSG) was deployed north of the Arctic Circle for the first time since the Cold War. But as Russia invaded Europe's second largest state, the two rivals have seemingly suspended provocative deployments on both sides of the Gap separating the Norwegian and Barents Seas. Why is this so?

The military restraints need research-based scrutiny. Empirical evidence is essential to validate the extent to which U.S. and Russian forces actually have tempered their Arctic saber rattling. After all, the region is highly sensitive: The Norwegian and Barents Seas are key corridors for Russia's attack submarines, ballistic missile submarines, and nuclear aviation forces operating out of the Kola Peninsula. Studying great power benevolence also provides us with more knowledge on how nuclear adversaries are tied together by mutual interests in the Arctic. Among them are efforts to prevent the Ukraine War from spiraling into uncontrollable proportions. More scrutiny thereby contextualizes Arctic muscle flexing to one of the most perilous security situations of our time. The article's findings thus contribute to the literature on military strategy and may illustrate how operational assertiveness and restraint shape the Arctic security dynamics.

To explore the puzzle, the article's *Theory and Methods* section first describes brinkmanship as a model of explanation and choices on validity and reliability are clarified. The *Data & Analysis* section thereafter describes and explains U.S. and Russian operations between 2015 and 2024 through the lenses of brinkmanship. Finally, the *Conclusion* section details why U.S. and Russian forces tempered their code of conduct outside Norway's coast.

2. Theory and Methods

Brinkmanship is a risky strategy in which agile adversaries threaten to kill each other with brute force. As this analysis explores why U.S. and Russian forces have stopped the threats, brinkmanship's theoretical logic is particularly useful; it allows scholars and practitioners to comprehend more thoroughly why the two rivals constantly try to coerce each other without going to war. Firmly anchored in the realist school of thought, the anarchic international structure makes military capabilities the most salient instrument to attain national interests.¹ Within this self-help system, the art of brinkmanship follows a competition-based zero-sum logic: to deter and coerce opponents as much as possible, but always with self-imposed restraints so that adversaries' red lines are not crossed. Brinkmanship may otherwise fuel tension to a point where adversaries see no other alternative but to employ deadly force, partly for

1 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addington-Wesley Publishing, 1979), 163–170.

“face saving” reasons, but also for re-installing respect, recognition and influence at home and abroad.

This ambivalence is neatly encapsulated by the American economist and professor in nuclear strategy and arms control, Thomas Schelling (1921–2016). Describing brinkmanship as “manipulating the shared risk of war”, Schelling explains how great powers often seek to “exploit the danger that somebody may inadvertently go over the brink, dragging the other with him”.² By using assertive tactics of fear and intimidation, the theory prescribes a military strategy where forces seek to compel opponents to back down. The way a crisis unfolds is thereby out of the hands of both parties; neither side has full control of how the antagonizing force may interpret the situation and respond. Therefore, it is easy for brinkmanship to accidentally lead to uncontrollable escalations and grim prospects for a nuclear armageddon.³

A theoretical mechanism for avoiding war is therefore subtle salami-tactics; a course of action where protagonists are engaged incrementally – over months or years inside the same operational theater. The point is to create “a new normal”. Ambiguity, therefore, is a central characteristic, largely due to “the plain impossibility of defining [any adequate responses] in exact detail. There are areas of doubt even in the most carefully drafted statuses and contacts”.⁴ Unexpected force deployments, snap exercises, and also transparent maneuvers have thus one aim: to carefully probe rival responses. If responses are tardy or lenient, the protagonist is incentivized to push the limit one more step. But if reactions are assertive, offensive or even aggressive, your own code of conduct should be tempered.⁵ Restraints or reassurances are thereby imposed within your chain of command to move away from the brink of war. At the salami-tactic’s core are efforts to gain advantageous outcomes by taking calculated risks against the adversary’s core interests. The goal is to make the opponent’s military force back off, scale down, or preferably, leave the entire operational area.⁶

The avenues are thus manifold and complimentary. Assertive action may be diplomatic communication through secret backchannels, narratives published in global media, or military signaling with a tailored posture in the contested area. The message is nevertheless the same: a hard-core realist intention to communicate resolve and willingness to use extreme methods rather than concede to opponents’ coercion. As pointed out by Schelling, we want to change his behavior, but in a way “where he is *not* going to do something”.⁷

2 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence (Updated Edition)* (Yale University, 2008), 99.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 67.

5 Ibid., 100–101.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 77.

However, as Richard Ned Lebow (1941–) points out, brinkmanship is a perilous stratagem. As protagonists seek to impose threats with potentially catastrophic nuclear consequences, numerous risks may arise. Examples are fear, repression, anxiety, and disintegrating coping mechanisms inside your opponent's chain of command.⁸ This may easily happen,

[...] during the most acute stages of an international crisis; critical junctures when decision for peace or war hangs in the balance. A breakdown in the policy maker's defenses may result in erratic behavior, paranoia, or paralysis.⁹

The brinkmanship theory therefore prescribes a plausible relationship between restraint and non-violent outcomes. As pointed out by Lebow, a key explanatory mechanism is to enforce a trade-off between the belligerents.¹⁰ Neither of the parties has a strong interest in pushing their rival over the brink. Both parties acknowledge their mutual destiny inside the ambiguously gray zone between peace and war, a strategic environment of mutual deterrence and denial but also prospects for benevolent signaling or even silent cooperation through restraints. Gradually therefore, a theoretical mechanism of *crisis stability* tends to arise. This is a situation where both parties are tied together by a unifying interest in respecting each other's "back yards", spheres of interest, or areas of operations, i.e. by avoiding preemptive operations, escalatory exercises, or provocative maneuvers. These are mechanisms put in place so that security margins increase. Inadvertent wars are thereby precluded. Instead, restraints allow belligerents to buy time because coercion is balanced with efforts to calm down. As explained in Lebow's *Between Peace and War* (2020), avenues for communication must be made available, not least to clarify potential misperceptions or misunderstandings as "stereotyped interpretations of dramatic historical events, especially wars and revolutions" unfold.¹¹

Why brinkmanship?

Brinkmanship is only one of many analytical tools used to explore war avoidance. Why is this perspective more fruitful than other instruments? The scholarly critique of brute force is profound, particularly among constructionists. Misperception, misunderstanding and spirals of tension are not necessarily due to hostile U.S.–Russian intentions and threatening capabilities in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. As pointed out by Julie Wilhelmsen, antagonists may also see each other as "different" and "dangerous" because opposing states for years have been "locked into a negative

8 Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War (40th Anniversary Revised Edition)* (Palgrave, 2020), 141.

9 Ibid., 144.

10 Ibid., 72.

11 Ibid., 128–132.

spiral of identification that may lead to a violent confrontation”.¹² According to Wilhelmsen, therefore, any kind of “positive recognition is gradually blocked out”.¹³ This logic builds on the proposition claimed by Alexander Wendt, in the sense that “anarchy is what states make out of it”.¹⁴

In other words, U.S. and Russian rivalry outside Norway’s coast is thereby based on a socially constructed imagination of Self and Others. Rather than explaining Arctic cessation of hostilities due to *structure*, with mechanisms like rivalry, balance of power and threatening capabilities, constructionists emphasize *process*: norms, values and beliefs that for a certain time-span have generated a distinct collective belonging and a unique common identity.¹⁵ In a discursive identity representation, therefore, any other entity will be seen as a threat to one’s own self-esteem, but only within a specific historical contingent. To illustrate the point: In 2003, Russian pilots joined their Norwegian colleagues from the back seat of F-16s during a friendship event in the sky above Bodø Airport; 20 years later and 20 years before, the Russian and Norwegian pilots were fierce enemies. As seen by constructionism, it is the psychological rather than the material threat that is foremost in explaining antagonism.¹⁶

Constructionists do not, however, provide compelling explanations for why opposing entities, like U.S. and Russian forces outside Norway’s coast, temper their *modus operandi*. The Self–Other paradigm clearly helps us to comprehend why U.S. and Russian forces perceive each other as enemies. But mechanisms like identity and self-perception do not explain why antagonists cede provocations, abstain from escalatory maneuvers, or even induce tacit cooperation.

A similar critique is voiced by Beverly Crawford. She claims states to be more concerned by economic vulnerability rather than military threats. This is because a global production and exchange of services expose antagonists to an “economic security dilemma”.¹⁷ How states construct their threat assessments thereby change. Less emphasis is put on concrete and imminent opponent capabilities. Instead, attention goes to military vulnerabilities thriving inside your rivals’ force structure.¹⁸ This theory provides convincing explanatory power to our Arctic case, because U.S. and Russian forces are acutely aware of endemic shortages prevailing within their own

12 Julie Wilhelmsen, “Spiraling toward a New Cold War in the North? The Effect of Mutual and Multifaceted Securitization”. *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 3 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa044>

13 Ibid., 5–6.

14 Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”. *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

15 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press), 96.

16 Ibid., 235, 237.

17 Beverly Crawford, “Hawks, Doves, but No Owls: International Economic Interdependence and Construction of the New Security Dilemma”, in *On Security*, ed. Ronnie D. Lipschutz. (Columbia University Press, 1995).

18 Ibid., 150–151.

forces. But Crawford's interdependence perspective is confined to the civilian policy level. This level mainly exists inside the bureaucratic state apparatus. Presumptions of interdependency and economic vulnerability thereby fail to grasp the constant strategic interaction of probing and tempering; a dynamic and unpredictable chain of events that belong to the realm of strategy. This action unfolds below politics. It belongs to the upper echelons of a command chain where generals and staff officers meet their superior politicians and staff of policy advisors.

Brinkmanship is therefore used to explore the dynamic tit-for-tat puzzle in the Arctic. Hence, it allows us to validate the empirics found on both sides of the Bear Gap; it thus allows other researchers to replicate the analysis by using the same data from military exercises, deployments, Russian NOTAMs and U.S. maneuvers in the Norwegian and Barents Sea. In that sense, the theory of brinkmanship facilitates an analytical frame of reference upon which concepts like *restraint* and *war avoidance* can be tied to observable facts outside Norway's coast. To explain why U.S. and Russian forces stopped antagonizing each other, the following empirical expectation is deduced: *fear of inadvertently escalating the Ukraine War into an unintended confrontation incentivized U.S. and Russian forces to restrain their courses of action outside Norway's coast.*

The causal relationship between the dependent and independent variable can be illustrated as follows:



Model: Expected correlation between military restraint and war avoidance

The two variables unfold inside a complex political and social environment. This means that many variables are at play simultaneously. They are thus heavily intertwined. Contextual covariance may i.e. come from Russia's ambition to challenge U.S. leadership and dominance in Eastern Europe, Russia's perception of being militarily contained throughout Europe, or Russia's resort to nuclear threats and assertiveness to preclude U.S. dominance. Covariance may also evolve from a more offensive 2018 U.S. Defense Strategy or Joint Chief of Staff inclinations to promote a more forward-leaning *Dynamic Force Employment* concept during the first Trump administration (2017–2021). Any of these alternatives, and many others, may be defined as relevant underlying, independent or intermediate variables. These variables are nevertheless contextual; they all serve as a historical and analytical backdrop – an overlay for the essence of this study, which is the monocausal relationship between military restraint and war avoidance.

The theory-based correlation guides my data collection along clearly defined Arctic borders, which includes the western and northern coast of Norway, the Norwegian Sea, the Barents Sea, the Svalbard Archipelago, the Bear Island, the Kola

Peninsula, and Swedish and Finnish territories north of the Arctic circle. The empirical evidence rests on a coherent operationalization of the two variables. “Military restraint” is defined as a calm and controlled maneuvering with air, sea and land forces. The variable is measured along indicators like Russian abstentions of exercises and NOTAMs west of the Bear Gap, as well as U.S. abstentions of potentially provoking operations east of the Gap.¹⁹ “War avoidance” is defined as an evasive *modus operandi* aiming to abrogate tension. The variable is operationalized as subtle U.S. and Russian signaling of mutual respect for each other’s key areas of operations in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. The indicators are visualized through benevolent operational patterns related to U.S., Norwegian and Russian requirements for strategic depth, strategic warning time, and mutual respect for each other’s strategic sea lines of communication on both sides of the Gap.

The indicators also facilitate focused data collection. Using an explorative design in the nine-year span of 2015–2024, sources are retrieved from policy entities in U.S., Russian and Norwegian bureaucracies. Secondary data from media outlets, like *The Barents Observer*, *Naval Today* and *Interfax*, have been the starting point. This method allowed me to exploit a rich variety of sources. This again snowballed into more reliable primary sources such as U.S. and Russian strategic guidance, Norwegian policy accounts, and NATO briefings. Contemporary expert comments from media outlets improved data reliability with important correctives. Replication is made possible through meticulous referencing. This approach is nevertheless not without problems. *Interfax* suffers from a heavy political and ideological bias which may lead to false or unnuanced interpretations of open-source data. Likewise, *The Barents Observer* and *Naval Today* also have a certain Western bias. Their independence and journalistic integrity are nevertheless much stronger than Russian sources. The author’s own cognitive biases may also be problematic. As the research design is rigorously tied to a rigid analytical framework consisting of clearly defined theories and empirical expectations, cherry-picking of data and selective interpretations fitting a monocausal framework may impact the conclusion. Falsification has therefore been a guiding principle: Plausible interpretations based on alternative theoretical propositions have already been discussed and will be evaluated in the conclusion.

The consecutive analysis rests on an “interactive dialogue” between theory, data, and strategic frameworks in Russia and the United States. The triangulation is underscored by the author’s decade-long experience from operations at tactical, operational and strategic levels in Norwegian and NATO chains-of-command. To strengthen the validity and stimulate criticism on the research design, drafts were evaluated by two highly competent anonymous peers, thereby exposing theoretical and methodological shortcomings.

19 The abbreviation NOTAM is *notice to airmen* and is used to inform air- and ground personnel that are planning their flights in adjacent areas.

On this basis, how can the U.S. and Russian slide from malign to benign operations be described and explained? Chronologically organized into a malign period (2015–2021) and a benign period (2022–2024), the *Data & Analysis* section explores the most conspicuous, unusual or unprecedented operations. Indicators of such activities are geographical locations, timing in relation to adversary deployments, size of deployment, as well as force postures made for political communication. Hence, as Kristian Åtland, Thomas Nilsen and Torbjørn Pedersen remind us, even though U.S. and Russian operations correlate, it may not necessarily be a causal relationship.²⁰

3. Data & Analysis

The Malign Period, 2015–2021

Russia's 2014-annexation of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula was a game changer for the U.S.–Russian rivalry in the Arctic. As NATO members took more than six months to understand whether Russia's rim states should be reassured by what was to be *Enhanced Forward Presence*, the Obama administration decided to launch the *European Deterrence Initiative* in 2015.²¹ Aiming to reassure Norway, Poland and the three Baltic allies, Congress provided solid funding for increased U.S. military presence and visibility in Northern Europe. New investments thus laid the groundwork for more airfields, harbors, radars and designated areas for rapid U.S. deployments closer to Russia's borders.²²

In March 2015, for the first time since the extraordinarily large *Barfrost* exercise in 1967, more than 8,000 U.S., UK and Norwegian troops conducted mechanized combat operations during the *Joint Viking* exercise in West-Finmark. This is Norway's northernmost county, which is situated barely 45 kilometers from Yasen and Oscar II submarines at Zapadnaya Litsa, 87 kilometers from Victor III and Sierra II submarines at Cuba Ara, and 111 kilometers from the strategic Borey and Delta IV submarines at Gadzhiyevo, on the Kola Peninsula.²³ Three days before the exercise

20 Kristian Åtland, Thomas Nilsen and Torbjørn Pedersen, "Military Muscle-Flexing as Interstate Communication: Russian NOTAM Warnings Off the Coast of Norway, 2015–2021", *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, no. 72 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.133>.

21 Tormod Heier, "Britain's Joint Expeditionary Force: A Force of Friends?" in *The United Kingdom's Defence After Brexit. Britain's Alliances, Coalitions, & Partnerships*, eds. Robert Johnson and Janne H. Matlary (Palgrave, 2019).

22 U.S. Department of Defense, *European Deterrence Initiative. Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year 2021*. February 2020. https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/def-budget/fy2021/fy2021_EDI_JBook.pdf.

23 Thanks to Ina Holst-Pedersen Kvam, researcher at the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy for this information, and for advice during research for this article. Thanks also to captain (N) Steinar Torset and associate professor Amund Nørstrud Lundesgaard at the Norwegian Command and Staff College in Oslo for comments on previous versions of this article.

ended, Russia launched a snap exercise involving four military districts, the entire Northern Fleet, and almost 40,000 troops.²⁴ According to Russian defense officials, *Joint Viking* was provocative – arguing the Norwegian Frigate *KNM Thor Heyerdahl* could target the Northern Fleet’s Headquarters in Severomorsk with *Naval Strike Missiles*, just 150 kilometers away – outside the city of Kirkenes.²⁵ Two weeks later, the U.S. Strategic Command in Nebraska launched the *Polar Growl* training mission with four *B-52 Stratofortresses* in the same region.²⁶ Capable of delivering “[...] a large payload of precision nuclear and conventional ordnance over long distances”, the deployment signified a robust U.S. power projection to an Arctic region gradually regaining its Cold War significance.²⁷

A similar dynamic took place during the Norwegian *Cold Response* exercise in 2016. This was the first time the exercise shifted from crisis response to collective defense.²⁸ Escorted by Norwegian F-16 *Fighting Falcons*, three *B-52 Stratofortresses* operated in mid-Norway, south in the Norwegian Sea and far off the Bear Gap.²⁹ According to U.S. Air Force General Philippe Breedlove, it was highly unusual for the strategic bombers to deploy to mainland Europe. Temporarily stationed at Moron Airbase in Spain and Fairford Airbase in the UK, the three B-52s responded to Russian strategic bombers that since 2014 increasingly entered European airspace from corridors in the Norwegian Sea and the Barents Sea.³⁰ Of particular concern were Russian strategic aviation forces simulating attacks against Stockholm, which accelerated Sweden’s push for closer multinational air defense cooperation north of the Arctic circle.³¹

24 Espen Stiberg, “Russian Snap Military Exercise in March of 2015: What Implications Did This Exercise Have?” (Master thesis, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2017).

25 “Norway Arctic Exercise ‘A Provocation’: Russia,” *The Local*, March 18, 2015. <https://www.thelocal.no/20150318/norway-arctic-exercise-a-provocation-russia>

26 U.S. Air Force, “Polar Growl Strengthens Allied Interoperability, Bomber Navigation Skills”. *U.S. Strategic Command Public Affairs*, April 6, 2015. <http://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/583614/polar-growl-strengthens-allied-interoperability-bomber-navigation-skills>.

27 Joseph Raatz, “Bomber Receives Warm Welcome”, *AFSTATAIR*, February 29, 2016. <http://www.afgsc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/681635/bombers-receive-warm-welcome-for-cold-response>.

28 Duncan Depledge, “Train Where You Expect to Fight: Why Military Exercises Have Increased in the High North”. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, no. 3 (2020): 297. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.64>.

29 Thomas Nilsen, “B-52 en Route to Norway”, *The Barents Observer*, February 29, 2016. <http://www.thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/2016/02/b-52s-en-route-norway>.

30 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “In a Rare Deployment, B-52 Bombers Head to Europe for Training Exercises,” *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2016. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/02/in-a-rare-deployment-b-52-bombers-head-to-europe-for-training-exercises>.

31 “Russia Carried Out Practice Nuclear Strike against Sweden,” *The Local*, February 3, 2016. <https://www.thelocal.se/20160203/russia-did-practice-a-nuclear-strike-against-sweden>; see also Depledge, 2020, p. 297.

Sweden's admonition materialized in 2017. In May, an unprecedented number of 11 countries deployed over 100 military aircraft to Rovaniemi (Finland), Bodø (Norway) and Luleå (Sweden) in what was, to this point, the largest *Arctic Challenge* exercise held by Western powers north in the Arctic.³² Operating closer to Russia's nuclear forces in the Barents Sea, it is likely to assume that Russian forces responded. Two days before *Arctic Challenge* ended, Russia simulated offensive air operations towards Bodø, where Norway's Joint Operative Headquarters and Main Air Base are located.³³ The Russian operation succeeded an unparalleled maneuvering against a NATO Surface Action Group exercising anti-submarine warfare outside the Lofoten Islands the week before. Amid growing NATO concern of Russia's growing undersea capacity, 12 jetfighters from the Northern Fleet simulated attack profiles towards the NATO vessels.³⁴ The Russian operations coincided with the United States' rotational deployment of USMC forces to mid-Norway in February and was further invigorated by simulated air attacks against the U.S.-funded Globus-II intelligence radar at Vardø – a few kilometers from Russia's border. During the fall, Russia moreover deployed nuclear-capable *Iskander* missiles 15 kilometers from the Norwegian border during the *Zapad-17* exercise. Simultaneously, electronic jamming of GPS signals interfering Norway's civilian aviation services began (and continues to this day).³⁵

The 2017 escalatory pattern continued into 2018. While Russia exercised new attacks against the Intelligence radar at Vardø,³⁶ the U.S. 2nd Fleet was reactivated after its closing in 2011. Contextualized into *a fourth battle of the Atlantic*, the fleet was earmarked for naval operations up to the North Pole.³⁷ A firmer containment of the Northern Fleet coincided with the Trump administration's *National Defense Strategy*.³⁸ Acknowledging a declining competitive edge vis-à-vis Russia and China, the 2018 document launched *Dynamic Force Employment* as a new operational

32 "A Unique Nordic Live-fly Exercise", *NATO Allied Air Command*, undated, 2017. <http://www.ac.nato.int/archive/2017/ace17-is-a-unique-nordic-livefly-exercise>.

33 Morten Lunde Haga, "Etterretningstjenestens årlige trusselvurdering", *Oslo Militære Samfund*, March 5, 2018.

34 Steinar Torset, "Er vi egentlig klar for Cold Response?", *Forsvarets Forum*, March 11, 2022.

35 Torset, 2022; Etterretningstjenesten, *Focus 2018*, Oslo, undated.

36 Lunde Haga, 2018.

37 James Foggo, "The Fourth Battle of the Atlantic." *Proceedings* no. 142 (2016). <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2016/june/fourth-battle-atlantic>; "U.S. 2nd Fleet Reactivates to Counter Russian Navy," *The Maritime Executive*, December 31, 2019. <https://maritime-executive.com/article/u-s-2nd-fleet-reactivated-to-counter-russian-navy>

38 Tormod Heier, "Utfordringer i norsk-amerikansk krisehåndtering", in *Militærmaktens rolle i norsk krisehåndtering*, eds. Ann-Karin Larssen and Tormod Heier (Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2024).

concept.³⁹ According to Rodihan et al., the purpose was “to reinforce lethality [by] more quickly massing fires and generating the required regional overmatch to achieve operational success and offset any reduced forward presence”.⁴⁰ Northern Europe should thus be the key staging ground for the Trump administration’s new concept. The aim was to “generate uncertainty” and “impact adversary thinking”.⁴¹

Guided by the principle of “strategically predictable but operationally unpredictable”,⁴² the aircraft carrier USS *Harry Truman* deployed on short notice into NATO’s largest post-Cold War exercise at the time, *Trident Juncture* in October. NATO’s Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated U.S. authorities would not reveal when and where such force projections would occur “out of operative necessities”.⁴³ The deployment was nevertheless unique. For the first time since the 1980s, an American CSG passed north of the Arctic Circle. Instead of following the normal operational pattern of not passing Vestfjorden, south of Lofoten, the carrier deployed up north to the region’s largest city Tromsø – closer to the Bear Gap and the Barents Sea.⁴⁴ The deployment led to a highly unequaled response: Over the next three weeks, three Russian NOTAMs were announced; one around *Heidrun*, *Kristin* and *Norne* – the strategically important oil and gas fields on Norway’s western coast, which also happened to be the main corridor for NATO’s deployment during the ongoing exercise; one NOTAM outside the coast of Finmark; and one north-west of Lofoten. Even though only one live exercise actually took place, the Russian Navy had never announced NOTAMs and missile firing that far west before.⁴⁵

What may seem like a classical “tit-for-tat” logic persisted into 2019. In July, NATO’s anti-submarine exercise, the annual *Dynamic Mongoose*, was launched for the first time north of the Arctic Circle. Led by a U.S. flagship, the maritime task group consisted of a record-high 27 units from nine countries.⁴⁶ The unprecedented deploy-

39 U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington D.C., 2018. <http://www.dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

40 Conor Rodihan, Matthew M. Crouch and Ronald C. Fairbanks, “Predictable Strategy and Unpredictable Operations: The Implications of Agility in Northern Europe,” *Atlantic Council*, May 18, 2021, 6. <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/predictable-strategy-and-unpredictable-operations-the-implications-of-agility-in-northern-europe>.

41 Ibid., p. 4, 9, 10; U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 7.

42 U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 5.

43 Marta C.S. Holmes, “Gigangskip øver på å redde Norge fra angrep,” *VG*, October 12, 2018. <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/i/L07ndJ/gigangskip-oever-paa-aa-redde-norge-fra-angrep>.

44 Tormod Heier, “Norwegian Problems of Confidence Building: Geopolitical Exposure and Military Vulnerabilities in the High North”, in *Defending NATO’s Northern Flank. Power Projection and Military Operations*, eds. Njord Wegge and Leon Strauss. (Routledge, 2024).

45 Heier, “Norwegian Problems,” 111–112; Åtland, et al. (2022), p. 74.

46 “NATO ASW Exercise Dynamic Mongoose Underway Off Norway,” *Naval Today*, July 8, 2019. <https://www.navaltoday.com/2019/07/08/nato-asw-exercise-dynamic-mongoose-underway-off-norway>.

ment was consistent with strategic guidance codified in the 2018 Defense Strategy and the Navy; raising the stakes by vigorously denying the Northern Fleet from creating a new normal was of paramount importance for controlling the transatlantic sea lines of communications. As important was the resurrection of Western powers' dwindling skills in Arctic anti-submarine warfare.⁴⁷ Another Russian exercise which included four NOTAMs in the Norwegian Sea were thereafter launched.⁴⁸ A record-breaking number of almost 30 ships, the entire Northern Fleet, was mobilized, leading to a rapid redeployment of U.S. Maritime Patrol Aircrafts to Northern Norway to maintain situational awareness and control.⁴⁹ According to Norway's Chief of Defence, the Russian air and naval operations could potentially leave large swaths of Norway behind Russia's forward lines of operations if the Atlantic corridor was threatened.⁵⁰

In May 2020, the operational pattern escalated. The geographical scope expanded from the Norwegian Sea into the Barents Sea, east of the Bear Gap. Eager for revenge after Russia's provocative deployments during *Trident Juncture*, Admiral James Foggo III, who commanded the exercise and now acted as commander of the U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa, deployed a multinational U.S.-led maritime task group of five vessels deep into Russia's economic zone. The operations were launched very close to the Northern Fleet's second-strike capability on the Kola Peninsula.⁵¹ Not since the mid-1980s had a U.S.-led Task Group deployed deeper into the Northern Fleet's primary area of operations.⁵² The operation echoed the 2018 Defense Strategy guidance, where "calculated risk-taking" was a prerequisite for challenging any adversary's calculus.⁵³ According to the Norwegian Force Commander at the Joint Operative Headquarters in Bodø, Norwegian forces abstained from such

47 Peter Hudson and Peter Roberts, "The UK and the North Atlantic: A British Military Perspective," in *NATO and the North Atlantic: Revitalising Collective Defence*, ed. John A. Olsen (Rusi, 2019).

48 Åtland et al., p. 72, 75.

49 Markus Tronhaugen, "Russerne med «uvanlig stor» militærøvelse: – Lenge siden vi har sett noe slikt," *NRK Nordland*, August 13, 2019. http://www.nrk.no/nordland/russerne-med-uvanlig-stor-militaerovelse_-_lenge-siden-vi-har-sett-noe-slikt-1.14658213; Atle Stålesen, "30 Russian Naval Vessels Stage Show of Force Near Coast of Norway," *The Barents Observer*, August 15, 2019. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/30-russian-naval-vessels-stage-show-of-force-near-coast-of-norway/157364>

50 Tronhaugen (2019).

51 Debora McCarthy, "Power and Presence: The U.S. and the Arctic with Admiral James Foggo and Ambassador (and SECNAVY) Kenneth Braithwait" episode 54, 2021. <http://www.generalambassadorpodcast.org/054>.

52 Thomas Nilsen, "U.S. Sixth Fleet Enters the Barents Sea with Missile Defense Destroyer," *The Barents Observer*, May 4, 2020. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/us-sixth-fleet-enters-the-barents-sea-with-missile-defense-destroyer/158855>.

53 U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 7; Rodihan et al., 2021, p. 17.

operations as this could provoke Russia.⁵⁴ However, less than a month after the largest Russian cyber-attack against the Norwegian Parliament in August 2020, the Norwegian frigate *KNM Thor Heyerdahl* surprisingly joined another U.S.-led Task Group into the same area.⁵⁵ Whether there is a correlation between the Russian cyber-attack and the Norwegian deployment is not verified. The unique deployment may have been due to informal U.S. expectations conveyed to the Norwegian government, or simply foreign affairs and defense ministers from the *Conservative Party* aiming to strengthen their ideological bonds with the American security guarantor.

In 2021, U.S. surface operations east of the Gap paused, but according to the Norwegian Prime Minister's Office, a new pattern had materialized: Russian exercises included more live missile fires further south and further west in the Norwegian Sea. According to the Russian *Interfax*, more than 10,000 soldiers, 30 vessels and 15 aircraft participated in anti-submarine warfare outside the coast of North-Norway in August.⁵⁶ The exercise was duly notified by Russian NOTAMs south and north of the Bear Island. According to the Norwegian force commander, the size and extent of the exercise was of unparalleled scale and intensity in modern times.⁵⁷

So was the unparalleled three-month deployment of four B1-B *Lancers* in mid-Norway between February and April, four months earlier. Making a "first-of-its-kind landing and refueling" north of the Arctic Circle, the supersonic nuclear bomber deployments seemingly fitted into an escalatory operational pattern where Russia may have responded with missile tests around the Bear Island.⁵⁸ One month later, in April, U.S. and Norwegian defense officials finalized the *Supplementary Defence Cooperation Agreement* with the United States, thereby allowing U.S. forces to operate more freely in and out of four U.S. Designated Areas on Norwegian territory.⁵⁹

54 Alf B. Johnsen and Klaudia Lech, "FOH-sjefen: Ønsker ikke allierte krigsskip og fly i Barentshavet". *VG*, July 11, 2020, <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/i/Jok9O7/foh-sjefen-oensker-ikke-allierte-krigsskip-og-fly-i-barentshavet>.

55 Thomas Nilsen, "In a Controversial Move, Norway Sails Frigate into Russian Economic Zone Together with U.K. and U.S. Navy Ships," *The Barents Observer*, September 8, 2020. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/in-a-controversial-move-norway-sails-frigate-into-russian-economic-zone-together-with-uk-and-us-navy-ships/158648>

56 Interfax, Russiske skip gjennomførte skyting i Atlanterhavet som en del av kommando- og stabsopplæringen til den nordlige flåten – (militarynews.ru), August 4, 2021.

57 Thomas Nilsen, "Northern Fleet with Missiles Warnings North and South of Bear Island," *The Barents Observer*, August 7, 2023. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/northern-fleet-with-missiles-warnings-north-and-south-of-bear-island/163270>.

58 Thomas Nilsen, "Russia Announces Multiple Missiles towards Bear Gap as US Air Force Bombers Deploy to Norway for First Time," *The Barents Observer*, February 17, 2021. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russia-announces-multiple-missiles-towards-bear-gap-as-us-air-force-bombers-deploy-to-norway-for-first-time/123043>.

59 Regjeringen [The Government], Undertegning av tilleggsavtale mellom Norge og USA om forsvarssamarbeid. *Kongeleg resolusjon* nr. 18/10760, Oslo April 16, 2021. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/kgires_forsvarssamarbeid/id2845034.

Summarizing the 2015–2021 period, the Norwegian and Barents Seas became an arena for a spiraling competition outside the Norwegian coast. On both sides of the Bear Gap, a U.S.-led cluster of western forces and an increasingly assertive Northern Fleet launched numerous extraordinary exercises and deployments. Trying to enforce “a new normal” at the cost of the other, the two protagonists deliberately deployed conventional and nuclear air and naval forces into the same area of operations. Employing assertive tactics designed for intimidation, U.S. and Russian codes of conduct illustrate how antagonist forces tried to compel each other to back down. But what happened outside the Norwegian coast as Russian forces launched its 2022 full-scale invasion further south on the continent?

The Benign Period, 2022–2024

Just as Russia’s Crimea annexation in 2014 was a game changer for the Arctic rivalry, so was Russia’s attempt to invade Ukraine eight years later. But contrary to the previous period, the two protagonists now softened their muscle flexing. Based on available data in an open-source environment, there was no military antagonism nor any provocative exercises between U.S. and Russian forces, neither in the Norwegian Sea nor in the Barents Sea. To contextualize this change, the empirical evidence builds on reports and observations on both sides of the Bear Gap, as well as new strategic guidance issued by U.S. and Russian authorities after the 2022 invasion.

Six months into the Ukraine War, the Northern Fleet’s largest 2022 exercise unfolded. But according to the Northern Fleet’s information office, only 10 vessels, an unspecified number of jet fighters, and coast air defense units participated.⁶⁰ Contrary to previous years, the 2022 exercise emphasized deterrence and defense in the Barents Sea only. Repelling attacks on Russia’s Arctic islands inside the bastion was top priority. The Northern Fleet’s *modus operandi* declined from deploying anti-access/air denial capabilities from forward positions in the Norwegian Sea. Instead, defensive positions were raised east of the Bear Gap between the Kola Peninsula, Franz Josef Land and Novaja Zemlya. The absence of Russian NOTAMs and simulated attacks against western forces and military infrastructure in Norway signified a new strategic guidance. Issued in the updated 2022 Maritime Doctrine five months into the Ukraine War, Russia’s maritime forces should from now on emphasize the Arctic. The Navy’s traditional number-one priority, which encapsulated the Atlantic Ocean and the Norwegian Sea, was lowered to a third priority after the Arctic and Pacific regions.⁶¹

60 Thomas Nilsen, “Northern Fleet Kicks Off Large Barents–Arctic Naval Exercise,” *The Barents Observer*, August 18, 2022. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/northern-fleet-kicks-off-large-barentsarctic-naval-exercise/161224>.

61 Russia Maritime Studies Institute, *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation*, trans. Anna Davis and Ryan Vest, U.S. Naval War College, 2022, p. 16–20. 20220731_ENG_RUS_Maritime_Doctrine_FINAL.txt.pdf (dnngwick.blob.core.windows.net)

Russia's guidance, and the subsequent shrinking exercise area, followed five months after NATO's largest exercise in Norway in 30 years, the biannual *Cold Response*. With over 30,000 troops, 220 aircrafts and 50 vessels from 27 member states, the Alliance nevertheless operated more than 600 kilometers off the Russian border. Moreover, contrary to the unparalleled 2018 deployment of *USS Harry Truman* north of the Arctic Circle, neither of the two participating CSGs operated further north than during the Cold War, in the Vestfjorden staging area south of Lofoten.⁶² Giving the Northern Fleet more strategic depth outside the Kola base complex, the NATO exercise reflected strategic messages from its Secretary General: allied transparency and predictability was imperative to avoid tension, provocations or unintended escalation in the currently volatile European situation.⁶³ The NATO message also echoed the new guidance issued by the Biden administration. Acknowledging the increased risk of unintended escalation after Russia's invasion, the 2022 Defense Strategy directed its force to operate more cautiously. Forging an operationally unpredictable course of action and hence taking *calculated risks*, as advocated in President Trump's 2018 strategy, was abandoned.⁶⁴ Instead, the 2022 strategy forged a more balanced approach: improved deterrence by a tighter synchronization of "conventional and nuclear aspects of planning" as well as improved crisis communication with competitors to stir escalation management and *crisis stability*.⁶⁵

The military restraints continued in 2023. On the Russian side, military exercises did not take place west of the Bear Gap, only in the Barents Sea. In this area, the operational pattern can best be characterized as normal activity: protecting the Northern Fleet's seven strategic submarines and safeguarding their operational routes and staging areas. This is consistent with the 2022 Maritime Doctrine. The Arctic area of operations should have precedence over North Atlantic operations. Inner bastion drills should deny NATO forces from entering the western gate into the Barents Sea. Maintaining a cohesive force with shorter communication lines closer to land-based logistical hubs was more pertinent than forward operations deep into the Norwegian basin.⁶⁶ Even though the exercises were manifold, up to 19 in one month, they never exceeded 15 vessels – which is approximately half of the Northern Fleet's warships.⁶⁷ The modest number reflected, according to UK

62 "HMS «Prince of Wales» i Vestfjorden," *Lofot-Tidene*, March 30, 2022. <https://www.lofot-tidende.no/hms-prince-of-wales-i-vestfjorden/s/5-28-374811>.

63 Nato, NATO - Opinion: Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in Bardufoss, Norway for Exercise Cold Response, 25-Mar.-2022, March 25, 2022.

64 U.S. Department of Defense, *The 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States*, Washington D.C., 2022, p. 5, 8. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1183539.pdf>.

65 Ibid., p. 9, 11-12, 17.

66 Russia Maritime Studies Institute, 2022.

67 Astri Edvardsen, "Den russiske Nordflåten med tett øvingsaktivitet gjennom hele mai," *High North News*, June 2, 2023; "Wikipedia: The Northern Fleet", downloaded October 5, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northern_Fleet.

Intelligence reports, a broader problem: Russia's lack of available troops and equipment. Following Russia's strategic failure in Ukraine, the Joint Strategic Exercise (JSE) *Zapad 23* was subsequently cancelled because "the JSEs have had limited training value and have largely been for show".⁶⁸ Russia's 2023 posture thereby confined itself to tactical operations east of Bear Gap, with no simulated attacks, NOTAMs or exercises in the Norwegian Sea.

On the western side, U.S. and allied forces launched the *Arctic Challenge 2023*, but this time a long distance from Russia's nuclear force. From Vestfjorden to Trondheim in mid-Norway, U.S. supersonic strategic bombers and a U.S. CSG exercised counter-maritime missions. Thirteen allied states performed joint operations with more than 150 aviation assets from 13 NATO countries.⁶⁹ Consistent with the 2022 carrier deployment, the 2023 deployment of USS *Gerald Ford* did not cross the Arctic Circle but performed a predictable deployment into the traditional Vestfjorden staging area.⁷⁰ The world's largest carrier thereby abstained from the extraordinary 2018 maneuver taken by USS *Harry Truman*.

The self-imposed restraints continued into 2024, but more so on the Russian than on the Western side. Despite the unmatched size and location of NATO's *Nordic Response* exercise in March, where approximately 20,000 troops from 13 nations exercised in an area only 200 kilometers from the Russian border in west Finnmark, Russian reactions were modest. Even though B-1 and B-52 strategic bombers from the U.S. Air Force operated north of the Arctic Circle, neither NOTAMs nor snap exercises were launched from the Russian side. Neither were any provocative maneuvers observed west of the Bear Gap. Apart from two Tu-142 Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) on an observer mission in the Norwegian Sea, the Northern Fleet followed NATO's exercise from defensive positions east of the Gap.⁷¹ NATO nevertheless launched its annual *Dynamic Mongoose* anti-submarine warfare exercises one month later. But contrary to the unusual 2019 deployment north of the Arctic Circle, the exercise unfolded 1,500 kilometers further west, outside the Arctic Circle.⁷² Rather than focusing on the strategically significant Bear Gap, which is one of the key avenues into Russia's nuclear staging areas, the Pentagon's updated 2024 *Arctic Strategy* emphasized "areas such as the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom

68 UK Defence Intelligence, "Intelligence Update". August 28, 2023. <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1696035180488651202?s=20>.

69 Forsvaret (2023). Arctic Challenge Exercise, May 22, 2023. <https://www.forsvaret.no/aktuell-og-presse/presse/pressemeldinger/arctic-challenge-exercise-2023>.

70 "Her over USS Gerald R. Ford", *Bladet Vesterålen*, June 7, 2023. <https://www.blv.no/her-over-uss-gerald-r-ford-i-vestfjorden/s/5-9-620661>.

71 Thomas Nilsen, "Russia Keeps Close Eyes on Nordic Response as NATO Expands into the North", *The Barents Observer*, March 6, 2024. <https://www.thebarentsobserver.com/security/russia-keeps-close-eyes-on-nordic-response-as-nato-expands-in-the-north/165526>.

72 Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Two Major NATO Naval Exercises Underway", *USNI News*, April 30, 2024. <http://www.news.usni.org/2024/04/30/two-major-nato-naval-exercises-underway>.

gap”.⁷³ This was, according to the strategy, “to reduce the possibility of escalation and misinterpretation”.⁷⁴ The Pentagon’s muted and discreet wording contrasts the *2019 Arctic Strategy*. Whereas “competition” with Russia was mentioned 17 times in 2019, the 2024 version mentioned it only twice. While Russia was deemed a key threat in 2019, China replaced the Russian threat in the *2024 Arctic Strategy*.⁷⁵

Russia’s benign response not only coincided with the 2022 guidance and its’ inner bastion defense concept. The response also deviated from the operational pattern that normally takes place outside the Norwegian coast. During interfleet transitions between the Barents Sea and the Baltic Sea, Northern Fleet capabilities usually perform live fire exercises with missiles outside Norway’s coast. According to *The Barents Observer* editor, Thomas Nilsen, this is “standard operational procedure” each time Russian naval surface groups transit between St. Petersburg and Murmansk. But in July, *en route to The Navy’s Day* in St. Petersburg and on the return trip, no missiles were fired.⁷⁶ The unique abstentions deviate from a consistent pattern where the Northern Fleet traditionally sees the Norwegian coast as a normal exercise area. The abnormal cancellation may signify a more evasive Russian *modus operandi* in the Norwegian Sea. The deviation is thus consistent with the unprecedented cancellation of the *Zapad 2023* exercise, which again seems to have been postponed in 2024. The two incidents indicate a weakened Northern Fleet; a strategic force that Pentagon’s *2024 Arctic Strategy* describes as barely having “the potential to hold the U.S. homeland...at risk”.⁷⁷ In other words, this is a force that since 2022 no longer can “manipulate the shared risk of war” against its western rival.

Analysis

Based on the empirical description, how can the slide from malign to benign operations be explained? Or more precisely, why have U.S. and Russian forces since 2022 seemingly stopped antagonizing each other outside the coast of Norway? Using Schelling’s theory of brinkmanship and Lebow’s warning of inadvertent wars, the empirical expectation suggests that in the post-Ukrainian environment, U.S. and Russian forces are incentivized to move away from the Arctic brink of war; restraints on military activities and respect for each other’s sphere of interest is safer than

73 U.S. Department of Defense, *2024 Arctic Strategy*, Washington D.C., 2024, p. 16. <https://www.media.defense.gov/2024/Jul/22/2003507411/-1/-1/0/DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY-2024.PDF>.

74 Ibid., p. 17.

75 U.S. Department of Defense (2019), *Report to Congress. Department of Defense Arctic Strategy*. Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, Washington D.C. <https://www.media.defense.gov/2019/Jun/06/2002141657/-1/-1/1/2019-DOD-ARCTIC-STRATEGY.PDF>.

76 Interview with Thomas Nilsen, editor of *The Barents Observer*, August 7, 2024. I am thankful for his advice and comments on earlier drafts on this manuscript.

77 U.S. Department of Defense, *Arctic Strategy*, p. 4.

“manipulating the risk of war”. Analyzing this assumption, two explanations seem particularly plausible: broader security concerns and strategic necessity.

On *broader security concerns*, it can be argued that the Arctic brinkmanship strategy has become too dangerous. Since the 2022 invasion, hundreds of thousands of troops across the Euro-Atlantic region have been mobilized and stand on a higher readiness status. U.S. and Russian nuclear forces have thus increased their patrolling and attained a key role in strategic deterrence.⁷⁸ As the two nuclear powers are forced to operate under more unpredictable circumstances, the current situation seems to be characterized by a shorter strategic warning time. A security environment where transparency, trust and confidence gradually wither may lead to inadvertent spirals of escalation and war. As assertive brinkmanship induces tension, and thus lower prospects for nuclear escalation, the alternative of regaining control over the situation is probably much safer for both protagonists. The alternative, where crisis unfolds in ways that neither Russian nor U.S. defense officials can fully control, is simply too risky after Russia’s attempt to invade Ukraine.

The post-Ukrainian restraints thereby signify an important aspect of Arctic security, namely that U.S. and Russian forces are intimately tied together by one mutual interest; neither side wants to see the Arctic become a staging ground for a risky brinkmanship strategy that subsequently leaves everyone worse off. On the contrary, by showing restraints in the Norwegian and Barents Seas, state leaders in Washington D.C. and Moscow are allowed to take active steps away from the brink of war. A plausible interpretation, therefore, is that Ukraine is not worth an increased risk for an existential nuclear war, neither as seen from a U.S. or a Russian perspective. As wars always unfold in unexpected ways and consequently are hard to predict, managing the fear of inadvertent escalation is safer than continuing to “manipulate the risk” in the Arctic.

Hence, as U.S. and Russian forces tacitly agree to maintain a subtle sense of *crisis stability* in the Norwegian Sea, defined as an absence of mutual provocations, the rivals nevertheless need to display presence and agility. But contrary to the malign 2015–2021 period, post-2022 deployments are more tempered. Cautiously confined to mutually exclusive zones of operations, Russian NOTAMs are absent in the Norwegian Sea while U.S. maritime task groups are absent in the Barents Sea. Abstaining from provocative exercises also means that the two adversaries pursue a stricter rule of engagement. Careful not to invoke an Arctic escalatory “tit-for-tat” logic, this “gentleman’s agreement” can be interpreted as a sort of tacit cooperation. It allows state leaders and military commanders to buy time in case of unintended accidents. In the post-Ukrainian environment, technical or human errors close to Russia’s second-strike capabilities on the Kola Peninsula should be avoided. The

78 U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 2022, p. 9, 11–12, 17; Hans Kristensen et al., “Status of World Nuclear Forces”, *Federation of American Scientists*, March 29, 2024. <https://fas.org/initiative/status-world-nuclear-forces>.

operative restraints thereby provide the two opponents with more room for maneuver. If tension inadvertently spirals out of control, U.S. and Russian defense officials are allowed to calm down, communicate, and clarify misperceptions or misunderstandings. Paradoxically, therefore, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has contributed to a sense of Arctic predictability; a sense of *crisis stability* where both rivals are tied to a common interest of war avoidance.

On *strategic necessity*, a plausible interpretation may be that both U.S. and Russian forces suffer from lack of sustainability within their own force structures. Replacing brinkmanship with self-imposed restraint may thereby be seen as a remedial move. This is because the alternative, which is a steady but growing force concentration of U.S. and Russian capabilities in the Arctic, reduces the freedom of movement in other theaters. As great power rivalry ensues globally, new crises may rapidly arise elsewhere, such as in Caucasus, in the Middle East, or in the South China Sea. For Russia in particular, lack of sustainability is particularly evident. Partly so in the Caucasus, where the Kremlin declined to reinforce Armenian troops during Azerbaijan's seizure of Nagorno Karabakh in 2023. Partly also in the Middle East, as Russian forces failed to support the Assad regime during the Syrian December 2024 collapse. Maintaining a global mindset by avoiding regional quagmires is a military-strategic prerequisite for U.S. and Russian flexibility and maneuverability.

For Russia in particular, the Ukraine War has inadvertently developed into a Donbas nightmare with extreme tolls on manpower, weaponry, ammunition, and material. Although the majority of the Northern Fleet's naval and aviation platforms have been spared from the war, key components needed to underscore the Fleet's operative status have most likely been ground down. Critical infrastructure, such as Murmansk's Olenya airfield, has been repeatedly attacked by Ukrainian drones. Essential combat support functions have thus been thinned out. Examples are detachments of cohesive ground and air defense capabilities earmarked for the Northern Fleet's force protection; Intelligence-Surveillance-Reconnaissance (ISR) assets needed for theater-wide situational awareness; maintenance and repair assets for command and control (C2) systems, radars, sensors, weapon storages, and logistical hubs. These are key functions critical for any agile combat system, whether they belong to Russian, American or Norwegian forces. If a crisis inadvertently occurs due to a risky brinkmanship strategy, a fully operational Northern Fleet may be hard to employ for sustained combat operations in the Norwegian Sea. This would not only humiliate the Kremlin, it would also create a new normal where U.S. and other Western forces more easily contain the Northern Fleet, thus gaining more control east of the Bear Gap.

Pursuing brinkmanship in the Norwegian Sea thereby seems unrealistic. Such a maximalist ambition, as seen during the malign period, will most likely invoke new counter reactions from a numerically and qualitatively superior NATO. This again

will expose Russia to a classical *overstretch problématique*: In one theater, an escalatory “tit-for-tat” situation against a NATO alliance that stands for “half of the World’s economic and military might”.⁷⁹ And in another theater, a protracted ground war in Europe’s second largest state which so far has depleted Russia’s military.⁸⁰

Strategic necessity may also be a plausible explanation for the United States. This is because U.S. defense officials are exposed to a historically unique situation. Never has the United States been challenged by two nuclear adversaries simultaneously. Contrary to the Cold War, when the Soviet Union constituted the main nuclear adversary, today’s power balance consists of both Russia and China. In this multi-polar environment, U.S. forces may more easily be entangled into multiple crisis management operations leading to the same *overstretch problématique* as Russia. But contrary to Russia, U.S. forces may more easily be tied to a major crisis management operation in South-East Asia, in Europe, and the Middle East, simultaneously. A brinkmanship strategy aiming to challenge adversaries’ red lines is therefore likely to fuse more tension inside multiple theaters at the same time. This is because a crossing of Chinese and Russian thresholds may stir unintended escalations binding U.S. forces to one or more theaters for a prolonged period. This risk reduces American flexibility. It may even force the Pentagon to synchronize the planning and employment of conventional and nuclear forces more extensively.⁸¹ Exercising a “tailored presence” in the Arctic is therefore, according to the *2024 Arctic Strategy*, a strategic necessity because U.S. forces also need to be “balancing against other global commitments”.⁸²

Therefore, by opening for more adversary crisis communication, and hence imposing operative restraints on its *modus operandi*, the Pentagon may more easily gain a better sense of escalation management. This is partly so outside Russia’s most important nuclear force in the Arctic but also in the Straits of Taiwan and Hormus, or in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea or Red Sea. More consciousness thereby allows U.S. nuclear and conventional forces to simultaneously contain or even deter Russia’s Northern Fleet while also addressing an increasingly assertive Chinese fleet in Southeast Asia. Avoiding an *overstretch problématique* that otherwise will force the United States to employ nuclear weapons thereby incentivizes a *modus operandi* that in relative terms

79 Jens Stoltenberg, Speech at NATO - Opinion: Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Heritage Foundation followed by audience Q&A, 31-Jan.-2024.

80 In 2022, Russia controlled 27 percent of Ukraine’s territory. In 2023 and 2024, Russia controlled 18 percent, leaving territorial gains to one per thousand square kilometers (https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian-occupied_territories_of_Ukraine).

81 U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 2022, p. 9–10; Congress, *Strategic Posture Commission Report*, Washington D.C., October, 2023, p. viii. <http://www.media/feature/publications/A/Am/Americas%20Strategic%20Posture/Strategic-Posture-Commission-Report.pdf>

82 U.S. Department of Defense, *2024 Arctic Strategy*, p. 1.

favors restraint before deterrence. Military restraints thereby provide U.S. decision makers with more leeway than coercive maneuvers aiming to compel Russian or Chinese forces towards the brink of war. Pentagon's 2022 priority on *crisis stability*, and the subsequent abolishment of the 2018 "operational unpredictable" concept, signify a more cautious mindset. Military restraints have become a strategic necessity, leaving the Arctic less exposed to military antagonism and provocations.

4. Conclusion

This article discussed why U.S. and Russian forces stopped antagonizing each other on both sides of the Bear Gap. Based on Schelling's brinkmanship theory, the analysis explored the relationship between military restraints and war avoidance. Plausible explanations of "broader security concerns" and "strategic necessity" were discussed. Which conclusion can be deduced?

The main finding is that brinkmanship ceased because Russia's invasion in Eastern-Europe made it too dangerous for the two rivals to continue a "tit-for-tat" logic outside Norway. As Europe's largest war since 1945 unfolded, the United States and Russia could no longer push each other towards the brink of war. In the post-Ukrainian security environment, both nuclear powers accept that inadvertent crises must be mitigated. Fearing the Ukraine war will escalate beyond its borders, both parties have tempered their Arctic saber rattling. As seen from Moscow and Washington D.C., an Arctic salami-tactic aiming to install fear, uncertainty and ultimately coerce the other part to step down in the Norwegian Sea has become irresponsible. The fact that no provocative incidents have been reported on either side of the Bear Gap signifies a tacit cooperation between the two protagonists. U.S. and Russian state leaders stick to a "gentleman's agreement". This is not out of sympathy for each other but out of fear, anxiety and a mutual respect for each other's destructive power.

Paradoxically, therefore, Russia's failed attempt to rapidly seize Ukraine has led to more Arctic predictability. Russia's failure to win decisively in Eastern Europe has, in relative terms, led to more *crisis stability* outside Norway. The General Staff's military blunder and failed *coup d'état* in Kyiv has become a regional tranquilizer in one of the most sensitive operational areas on Earth. The finding coincides with conclusions drawn by Kristian Åtland et al., claiming

[...] the dominant pattern of Russia's sea and air exercises on NATO's northern flank has changed significantly in the time that has passed since February 2022. Particularly noteworthy is the shift in *location* [...] from the Norwegian Sea to the Barents Sea.⁸³

83 Kristian Åtland, Thomas Nilsen and Torbjørn Pedersen, "Bolstering the Bastion: The Changing Pattern of Russia's Military Exercises in the High North," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 7, no. 1 (2024): 157. <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.280>.

The finding, however, must not be interpreted as a claim of Arctic peacefulness. Malign subwater activities with attack submarines, underwater drones, and special forces preparing for sabotage against critical infrastructure on the seabed, accelerate.⁸⁴ This is also the case with numerous civilian research and fishing vessels pursuing covert operations below the threshold of war. Examples are possible sabotage against fiberoptic cables, mapping of gas pipelines, hazardous maneuvers with jetfighters against personnel on oil rigs, reconnaissance on critical objects, electronic jamming of GPS signals, unexpected flows of refugees across borders, or outright provocations to map adversaries' response time and readiness. These so-called 'hybrid threats' are nevertheless less dangerous than nuclear rivals aiming to "manipulate the shared risk of war". Malign operations below the threshold of war are primarily a law enforcement issue. These challenges belong to the police rather than the military and should primarily be seen as a perennial phenomenon evolving between rivals.⁸⁵ To Russia in particular, this *modus operandi* – in crisis short of war – has become the most likely course of action due to Russia's military inferiority *vis-à-vis* NATO and the United States. Russia's secret services, like the FSB, GRU and SVR, is therefore a more useful political instrument than the Northern Fleet or the Leningrad Military District.

Validating the conclusions, my findings coincide with historical accounts. Suggesting that "[...] the potential for conflict or cooperation in the Arctic [is] a consequence of the grand strategies of the great powers and events outside the region",⁸⁶ the brinkmanship outside Norway's coast signify the broader great power rivalry. When tension is reasonably low, as during the malign 2014–2021 period, the Arctic is likely to experience more antagonism and dangerous brinkmanship. This is because the risk of coercive action is seen as strategically acceptable in Moscow and Washington D.C. But as tension increases, such as during the benign 2022–2024 period, restraint is likely to prevail. This is because threat-manipulation is simply too dangerous. Hazardous situations must be avoided so that regional wars in one theater do not spill over into a nuclear armageddon. Arctic brinkmanship, visualized through means of coercion and restraint, thereby fluctuates with the broader U.S.–Russian relationship.

The findings nevertheless need more scrutiny. Simplified univariate models do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive understanding. As we try to explain the

84 Gunhild Hoogensen Gjerv, "Security and Geopolitics in the Arctic: The Increase of Hybrid Threat Activities in the Norwegian High North", *Hybrid CEO Working Paper* no. 30 (2024). 20240327-Hybrid-CoE-Working-Paper-30-Security-and-geopolitics-in-the-Arctic-WEB-corr.pdf (hybridcoe.fi)

85 Odd Jarl Borch and Tormod Heier, "Understanding Hybrid Threats: An Introduction", *Preparing for Hybrid Threats to Security*, eds. Odd Jarl Borch and Tormod Heier (Palgrave, 2024), 5.

86 Rolf Tamnes and Sven Holtmark, "The Geopolitics of the Arctic in Historical Perspective," in *Geopolitics and Security in the Arctic. Regional Dynamics in a Global World*, eds. Kristine Offerdal and Rolf Tamnes (Routledge, 2014), 23.

U.S.–Russian pause in the Arctic, more variables need to be analyzed. As the dependent variable *war avoidance* unfolds inside a complex political, social and economic context, unwanted covariance from variables that go beyond *military restraint* are likely to be at play. A reasonable objection is that *military restraint* is vaguely defined. The two indicators “broader security concerns” and “strategic necessity” contain numerous ‘concerns’ and ‘necessities’ beyond nuclear war apprehensions and *overstretch problématique*. Hence, economic variables, such as the United States’ historical budget deficiency, or Russia’s dependency on a stable Arctic that fuels the Kremlin with 10 percent of its gross domestic product and 20 percent of its exports may also have explanatory power.⁸⁷ In that sense, the constructivist approach depicted by Crawford, emphasizing economic interdependence and military vulnerability, could be fruitful.⁸⁸

Other plausible explanations may thus be tied to decision-making processes inside the Norwegian state bureaucracy. Could it be that Norwegian governmental officials have had an impact, thereby representing a sort of “unwanted covariance”? If the brinkmanship model was eclectically combined with the bureaucratic policy models, such as those proposed by Kenneth Waltz and Graham Allison, a more nuanced interpretation may be deduced.⁸⁹ Of particular interest would be the plausible effect derived from the Norwegian governments between 2015 and 2024, which historically have aimed to temper the U.S.–Russian rivalry outside the coast. The same bureaucratic policy model could also be applied to gain more knowledge on how the inter-service rivalry between the Northern Fleet and the FSB influenced decision-making processes on the Russian side, as their Armed Forces ceased provocative maneuvers west of the Bear Gap. These puzzles go beyond this article’s problem statement but could be suitable for further research.

87 Sergey Kononuchenko, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 17th July 2018. (Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations (russiaun.ru).

88 Crawford, 1995.

89 Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (Columbia UP, 1959); Graham Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missiles Crisis* (Little Brown & Co., 1971).